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Evaluating the Mouths You Feed

Two topics that seem to continue to pop up in nearly every discussion I've had lately. Hot, dry weather and questions on how we will get ruminant animals through the fall and winter months, with the reduced amount of available forages, are topics on many producers' minds right now. It is not new information that things have been hot and dry in our part of the world, but what you might not have heard is that 7 of top 10 hay producing states have reduced production and/or inventories (*USDA-NASS, August 2022*), compounding forage supply tightening and price increase. As I see harvest crews rolling through crop fields across the area, this seems to be another logical feed option to explore, either on your property or by talking to your neighbors, versus feeding high priced hay. We might dive into that grazing crop residue topic down the road, but for today would like to look at the animal side of the feeding equation.

Paul Beck, Oklahoma State University Extension Beef Nutrition Specialist recently shared some thoughts on reducing stocking rates to adjust to decreased forage availability in Oklahoma. His assessment is very practical for producers in northeast Kansas trying to make it through the rest of the summer and into the fall, although fortunately we aren't experiencing the severe drought our neighbors to the south and west are. Evaluate your individual operation's situation and apply these concepts where practical.

1. If you are an operation that keeps your own calves or purchases stocker calves to utilize extra grass, this may be the time to sell calves early or send calves to a grow yard or feedlot. Many operations in Oklahoma use 30 to 50% of their summer forage for stockers in normal years. When forage production is limited these calves can be marketed, reducing the culling of the cowherd that may need to occur.
2. Selling replacement heifers should also be considered, as these females will not provide a marketable calf for over a year. In this current circumstance, these cattle may be too large of a drain of resources to keep. Currently they have value in the feeder calf market, due to lower feeder supply. If you can't part with valued genetics, cull hard to keep fewer.
3. Cull cowherd to a number that you can afford to winter by getting rid of old cow, less productive cows and/or cows that have higher nutrient requirements. The number of cows remaining may be the actual sustainable long-term carrying capacity for your operation. It is easy to fall into the trap of mature cow size creeping up and keeping a few extra each year. This has a direct effect on forage resources and not in a good way.
4. If you are considering feeding on pasture, cross-fence your farm now before you have to start supplemental feeding. You will be surprised how much forage growth you will have if you allow pastures to rest. Once you have the farm subdivided you can utilize these pastures in a rotational grazing system in the future and may have the additional benefit of increased pasture health and improved harvest efficiency. Keep cows on a smaller area of your farm while you are feeding hay, this sacrifice paddock will allow much of the ranch a rest and concentrate the nutrients from hay feeding.

These steps may not be palatable, because we may have to change the way we do things, it may take more work than what we want to put in, or it may cost more than we want to spend. Our overarching goal should be to have an intact cattle operation when we get through this dry spell. Very rarely does it ever pay to "feed your way out of drought". While the examples shared are cattle, the concepts apply to sheep and goats as well. Now is the time to evaluate which animals are earning their keep and focus resources towards sustaining them.